DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 544 CG 012 504

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TITLE Helping Adults Assist Aging Parents.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the Gerontological Society (29th, New York, N.Y., October, 1977); Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Responsibility; Child Role; *Dependents; *Family Life; *Gerontology; Individual Needs; Needs Assessment; *Older Adults; *Parent Child Relationship; Research Projects

ABSTRACT

It is important to understand cultural, demographic and ethnic differences in how adult children experience their roles as parent-carers and to harness this understanding to effective use of adult children, either as intermediaries or front-line agents, in meeting the increasing needs for care that are likely to accompany their parents' aging. Thus study is based on a series of questions addressed to 791 respondents, aged 20-70, who had living parents or parents-in-law. The sample was subdivided into three age-sex groups based on an analysis of respondents by five-year age periods. The age-sex groupings represented respondents from 20-34 years old, 35-49 years old, and 50-70 years old. The findings suggest that parent concerns create stress, somewhat from the onset of adulthood, more so from age 35-50, and especially so over 50. Class and probably race went heavily in determining what people think ought to govern behavior of adults toward their parents. The findings suggest our need to know a great deal more about class and other differences in perceptions of appropriate filial roles. In this way, policies which assume family involvement can be judiciously formulated and administered. (Author)

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HELPING ADULTS ASSIST AGING PARENTS

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Paper Presented at the Gerontological Society,
San Francisco, Calif: November, 1977

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Public and private statements of preference regarding older Americans express unequivocal support of policies designed to sustain residence in the community. Increasingly, such statements posit the family, which most often means daughters or daughters-in-law, as the linchpin in the system of available supports. Yet, as Rosenheim (1976) has remarked with respect to the diversionary policies advanced in the effort to modify the juvenile justice system, the success of such policies is dependent on the capacities of alternative systems to absorb the people and problems diverted from the institutions through which they were formerly processed.

While survey data collected in 1976 on a probability sample of 1106 metropolitan area Chicagoans[1] accords with the many studies that have established that American families stay in close contact and engage in a substantial amount of exchange of service and support (Sussman, 1965), the data for many studies of this type have been collected on families in the mid-stage of the family life cycle, when the oldest generation is still capable of self-maintenance. European investigator Rosenmayr (1977), however, has suggested that the lack of conflict in American reports of extended family life is at odds with data he and other European investigators (Paucaud, 1969; Turowski, 1977, and others) have assembled, inpart because of the life-stage of the families studied often represented a broad age range and have seldom been restricted to examination of the relationship issues confronting or perceived by the children of the extremely dependent or very old. The stress inherent in the "parent-caring"[2] problem is also implied in the long-repeated warnings of sociologists and other students of aging and the "changing demographic profile" that as more and more people live to advanced ages, many will find themselves simultaneously sharing the burdens created by their own advancing age and that of their aged parents (Townsend, 1966; Troll, 1971).

Furthermore, very recent literature emanating from the field of family history (Demos, 1970; Fischer, 1977; Laslett, 1974; Stearns, 1976) has contained strenuous objection to the conventional portrait of relations between adult children and their parents. Rather, they provide documentation across time and varied cultural settings that what has been reported regarding the closely-linked extended family at best, encompass family lifestyles of only relatively recent historical origin. Until quite recently almost no work on the later-stage family has taken ethnic, demographic, or other sorts of subcultural differences into account.[3]

Where basic decisions regarding the potential of an older person to maintain independent living are contingent, as is often the case, on assessments of the degree and form of family support that can be engendered, the mindset of adult children is paramount. Yet, even fewer examples appear in which the demographic or cultural differences in adult children are acknowledged among the issues to be considered by practitioners when enlisting the family as an integral component of the systems which plan and provide for older people.

Adult children are clearly actors of some consequence in relation to the age changes taking place in their parents. As such their relationships to their parents and to those practitioners who serve their parents are crucial to the well being of all generations and family members involved. Thus, it becomes important to understand cultural, demographic and ethnic differences in how adult children experience their roles as parent-carers and to harness this understanding to effective use of adult children, either as intermediaries or front-line agents, in meeting the increasing needs for care that are likely to accompnay their parents' aging. It may be equally fruitful to inquire about this increasingly-occupied role of parent-carer for the sake

of better understanding its occupant--how he defines its rights and obligations, its boundaries and so on, and what impact varying definitions of such parameters may have. The status of child over perhaps the greater part of one's own life span was doubtless unexpected by many contemporary adults. Long-term parent-caring is a role for which few values may be observed to regulate the society as a whole. Conceptions of filial rights and obligations in adulthood may differ vastly from one group to another and from one generation to another. It would be surprising if the transition to parent-carer were without consequence when one takes into account the cultural ambiguity of the role, together with whatever even more personal meanings the adult child renders from the changes which are occurring in his parents and the consequent role reversals these effectuate in the parent-child relationship.

Our inquiry into the adult child as a social resource in care provision for the elderly and as a role in search of a definition was initiated through a series of questions addressed to the 791 respondents age twenty to seventy in the 1976 survey who had living parents or parents-in-law.[4] These respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of age-related changes they felt had occurred in their parents since the respondents had been interviewed four years earlier.

The findings reported by these respondents support the relevance of caution prior to assuming the later-stage family as a friction-free, universally available alternative support system. Over half the sample perceived changes in their parents in at least one of the four areas: serious health changes, reduced financial status (the least often reported concern), increased dependence on the respondent for moral support, and increased requests for concrete assistance from the respondent in the provision of time, energy or money. Over

Over forty percent of those with living parents reported being "somewhat or very much troubled" and even more "preoccupied" with changes in the physical, financial, or emotional status of their parents. Of the troubled group, over two-thirds sought some form of help about the changes in their parents they perceived as troublesome.[5] The report of change in any one of the four areas was generally correlated with the report of change in the other areas.[5]

The sample was subdivided into three age-sex groups based on an analysis of respondents by five-year age-periods. The age-sex groupings represented respondents from 20-34 years old, 35-49 years old, and 50-70 years old. The age range of those reporting concern over parent changes affords another index that the aging of one's parents is an issue of widespread concern. Only a slightly smaller percentage of adults from twenty to thirty-five years of age reported troublesome changes, and of this group only a slightly smaller number of males than females (see note 4). The intensity of expressed concern and preoccupation, however, increased significantly with age.[5]

Taken together, these findings suggest as a first conclusion that parent concerns constitute stress, somewhat from the onset of adulthood, more so from age thirty-five to fifty, and especially over fifty.[5]

What do adults feel they ought to do for their parents and how do they feel they ought to treat them? How confused or clear do Americans feel about what they perceive to be the norms of filial obligation? Are perceptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior to aging parents broadly shared throughout the culture? Do people turn to subcultural identifications or expectations to evaluate what is "right" in this realm for themselves and for others? And if so, which ones? A twenty-five item checklist of behaviors scored from "definitely" or "probably" appropriate or "okay" to "definitely inappropriate or not okay" was

constructed to ascertain such normative orientations (see Figure 1). These items were analyzed individually and as grouped through factor analysis to determine the relative influence of age, sex, race, and social class on normative choices. Substantive departures in choice occurred as a function especially of class. Race, also surfaced as an independent influence.[6] The comparatively weak effects of sex and age are of interest: Whatever may differentiate the actual behavior of the sexes or different age groups, their sentiments about what ought to happen relative to parent-caring activities are quite similar. Age appeared as an influence only in interaction with sex, race, or class, where on several items its effect appears to have been to mute the effects of class, particularly among older middle-class women. These women are more likely than younger women of their class to endorse setting limits "refusing your mother's request to live with you because your children object," "telling your mother you don't have time to phone or write as often as she likes," "telling your widowed father you don't approve of the woman he goes out with," and so on. Middle'class women are also more likely to express approval of such behaviors as siding in a parental argument, insisting parents move, or signing them up for a Senior Citizens group. The items "discuss your parents' financial situation" -- and "remind your parents they're getting too old to work as hard as they do" contribute heavily to the expression of far more ambivalence or ambiguity on this factor than on any other over the sample as a whole. Still those who were older, female or Black were likely to be better prepared to confront such matters that give public acknowledgement to dependency reversal.

Two additional items -- "place your mother in an old people's home because she can no longer get out of the house by herself" and "persuade your mother

to move in with you because she has no friends in her neighborhood any more even though she says she's happy there" also merit comment. Although almost all respondents considered such actions definitely inappropriate, class and age again vitiated their generally-perceived noxiousness.[5] Middle-class respondents appeared more likely to maintain boundaries between their parents and themselves and to approve of requesting parental restraint in making what they experience as demands.

The sharp class differences obtained by these measures of normative orientation appeared again when respondents were asked how much of a burden they would experience were they to assume responsibility for a variety of parent-caring activities ranging from cooking, shopping or paying bills to accompanying their parents to medical appointments, recreational events, and so on. Middle class respondents were far more likely than working class people to expect such activities to be somewhat or very burdensome.[5]

A global purvey of the effects observed suggests two conclusions in particular: First, class and probably race count heavily in governing what people think ought to govern behavior of adults towards their parents -- as both generations age. Generally, working class people appear less constrained about decisive intervention into their parents' affairs, more willing to "tell it like they see it" to mom and pop. Middle-class people, on the other hand, showed for more concern about boundaries, fearing or objecting more overtly to behavior suggesting invasion of privacy -- their own and their parents. Similarly, they seem much less able to give public acknowledgement to signals that age changes are taking place.

Second, while most people unambiguously dissapproved of the bulk of behaviors listed, and the vast majority were on the fence, there appeared to

be little clarity regarding behavior considered unquestionably appropriate. Perhaps those attracted to consider issues of social policy relative to the elderly should speculate about what two-thirds of such a sample found so objectionable about "signing a parent up for a Senior Citizen's group" or "taking over from one's mother the responsibility for preparing a holiday dinner that heretofore has been her responsibility." Surely, if the third who did approve such behavior are aware of the "oddity" of their opinion -- and if, furthermore, their parents see such issues from the other point of view -- there is reason for Rosenmayr to speculate that American intergenerational relations may be more conflictual than much of the literature would make them appear.

The findings suggest our need to know a great deal more about class and other differences in perceptions of appropriate filial roles -- if policies which assume family involvement are to be formulated and administered most judiciously. They also raise important questions regarding the stance of formal helping systems and agents -- family service agencies, social workers, counselors and so forth -- in their relationship to the children of the elderly. Are adult children better perceived as clients of such systems or as paraprofessional partners in a helping process? The decision, it would seem, must take account of the powerful differentiations which appear to make the varying groupings which have been identified. Clearly, the working class respondents in the sample had the expectation of serving as advisors, even planners relative to the issues they believe beset their parents, long before acute crises set in. The need for privacy and psychosocial distance which characterizes the middle class group, on the other hand, may lend insight into why so few middle class adults avail themselves of the services of family service workers until

acute problems with respect to their parents have arisen. Under the circumstance time shortage, frustration, or severe physical or mental impairment of the older person become the major influences on the planning and decision process. These data hint that middle-class adults may be constrained by generalized norms related to privacy boundaries, appropriate interpersonal distance within the family structure or age-grading which take on particularly sensitive meanings when attached to issues which have Oedipal undercurrents and which may, furthermore, stimulate discomforting attention to processes related to one's own aging. If middle-class people have greater difficulty than working class people in assuming personal responsibility as their parents increment dependent behaviors may require more, earlier and different interventions before their participation as partners in the helping process can be assumed by groups responsible for implementing policies based on the expectation that family members will unequivocably constitute an informal support system.

The even rarer (voluntary) visits of working class people to formal centers of social service, on the other hand, may with respect to the problem of aging parents, be more than a simple function of the general class differences reported in the literature (Gourash, 1977) regarding the enlistment of formal aid. Rather, in sharp contrast to the middle-class person responsible for a parent, the working-class person may be much more likely to feel that he is already properly groomed to articulate and confront the issues arising from present and predictable parental age changes. In either event, the greatest success in setting policy of aid to the elderly seems dependent on paying closer attention to the mindsets of their offspring towards issues related to the assumption of parent-caring responsibilities. Just as with little children in the nuclear family, we may better assess reality if we direct our observations and interventions to the variations among them.

NOTES

1. The data reported in this paper are drawn from a larger study of life events, role experience and adult adaptation made possible by a grant from the Administration on Aging, U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The total sample was first interviewed in 1972 and re-interviewed in 1976-77. The larger study is fully described elsewhere (Pearlin, 1972; Pearlin, L.I. and Lieberman, M.A. "Sources of Social and Emotional Stress"). The present analysis utilizes data on the subsample of 791 adults who had at least one living parent or parent-in-law.

2. The author wishes to express appreciation to Bernice L. Neugarten for coining this concept.

3. A noteworthy exception by Fandetti and Gelfand which examined differences in attitudes of Polish as opposed to Italian descent adult children towards institutionalizing their parents appeared in the March, 1976 issue of The Gerontologist. Fandetti and Gelfand found interesting ethnic, but more exciting generational (1st, 2nd, or 3rd generation American residence) differences.

4. An extended analysis of data reported elsewhere (Lieberman, Grace L. "The Impact of Parent Concern on Adult Children". Paper presented at the 29th Annual Meeting of the Gerontology Society, New York; 1976) yielded correlations of a sufficiently high degree ($r = .60$ or over) to suggest that for the population studied responses to measures regarding parents were about the same as those regarding parents-in-law. In the present paper, therefore, the term parent is used to mean parent or parent-in-law.

5. Significant at $< .05$ or better.

6. We can be less definitive about the effects of race because of the small number of Black respondents in this subsample (see Table II). The independence of race as a variable relative to expectations about filial obligation, however, has quite recently been well documented in a study of 1022 aging Philadelphians (Seelbach and Sauer, The Gerontologist 1977).

Table I. Increment in Intensity Bothered by Parent Concern over Adult Life

Bothered by Parent Changes		Age Sex: Twenty to Thirty four		Thirty five to Forty nine		Fifty to Seventy		Total
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Not at All or Only a Little	N	33	51	52	56	29	21	242
	%	(63)	(64)	(64)	(50)	(73)	(43)	(58)
Somewhat or Very much	N	20	29	29	56	28	28	173
	%	(38)	(36)	(36)	(50)	(27)	(57)	(42)
Total	N	53	80	81	112	40	49	415
	%	29		49		22		

$P < .05$

Table II. Distribution of Sample with Living Parents by Race and Educational Level

Education		Race: White	Race: Black	Total
Less than Eighth Grade	N	97	41	138
	%	(15)	(38)	(18)
High School Graduate		220	19	239
		(33)	(18)	(31)
Some College		174	37	211
		(26)	(35)	(27)
College Graduate or over		178	9	187
		(27)	(8)	(24)
Total		669	106	775
		(86)	(14)	

$P < .05$

FIGURE 1. ITEMS COMPRISING CHECKLIST ON NORMS OF FILIAL OBLIGATION*

1. Ask your parents to confide in you more often when things are bothering them.
2. Complain to your brother or sister that you're taking too much of the burden of caring for your parent..
3. Tell your spouse you can't go on vacation because your parent needs your help.
4. Sign your parent up for a Senior Citizen's activity group.
5. Tell your father he ought to have a doctor check his hearing.
6. Invite the relatives to your house for a holiday dinner that your mother has always prepared before.
7. Refuse your mother's request to live with you because your children object.
8. Place your mother in an old people's home because she can no longer get out of the house by herself.
9. Tell your father he's spending too much time in the house doing nothing.
10. Ask your uncle to take turns driving your parent to the doctor.
11. Tell your mother you don't have time to phone or write as often as she likes.
12. Persuade your mother to move in with you because she has no friends in her neighborhood anymore, even though she says she's happy there.
13. Tell your widowed father you don't approve of the woman he goes out with.
14. Ask your children to do special things for their grandparents because they are so old.
15. Take sides in an argument between your mother and father.
16. Borrow money from your father to help your children.
17. Insist on your parents moving near to where you live because they need your help.
18. Make your son stay home because your parents are coming to visit.
19. Contribute less money to support your parents than your brother or sister does.
20. Tell your spouse to be more attentive to your parents.
21. Suggest to your parents that they talk their disagreements over with their clergyman or a marriage counselor.
22. Ask your mother to babysit for her grandchild.
23. Tell your parents they are making too many demands on you.
24. Discuss your parents' financial situation with them.
25. Remind your parents they're getting too old to work as hard as they do.

* Scores of 1 vs. scores of 3 were summed to establish ANOVA comparisons.

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